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Polhamus, William Henry Harrison

Cedar creek: a poem



CEDAR CREEK:

1496

A P O E M .

BY

W . H . P O L H A M U S ,

LATE OF THE SECOND OHIO
VETERAN VOLUNTEER CAVALRY



The Imperial Press,

CLEVELAND, OHIO,

1901.

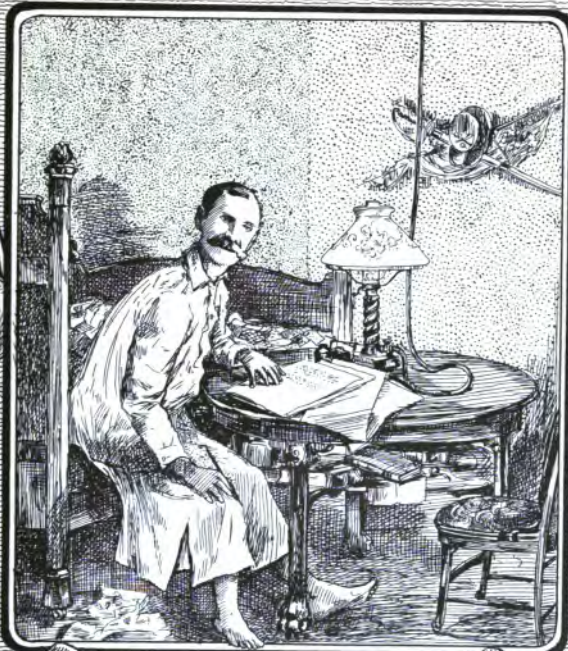
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W. H. POLHAMUS.

CEDAR CREEK

A Poem



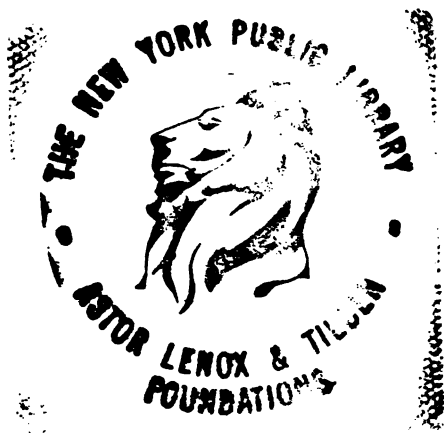
"It haunted my lone quiet hours in bed"

By

W. H. POLHAMUS

LATE OF THE
SECOND OHIO VETERAN VOLUNTEER CAVALRY.

Printed by J. H. Smith, Cincinnati, Ohio



*To the many brave boys, both living and dead,
who struck a blow for liberty and a united country
on that memorable 19th day of October, 1864, the
following lines are respectfully dedicated.*

P R E F A C E .

When first it was learned the "Grand Army"
would come

To Cleveland ~~this~~ Fall, a wild project was sprung
By some of my comrades, that near struck me
dumb.

It spoke of a poem they wished me to write,
On the battle that's called "Cedar Creek ;"
They knew, so it said, that I joined in that fight
"With Custer's Division," that charged on the
right ;

And thought I could paint the thing, "just out
of sight,"

While they knew of no other to seek.

The scheme, though well meant, was appalling
to me ;

I never dared hope a real poet to be !

And I told them point-blank, to look some other
way.

But after much thinking on what they had said,

Some muse to a fancy gave birth,

Which haunted my lone, quiet hours in bed ;

On the street and in church it would run through
my head,

And sometimes got mixed with the prayers that
I said :

I give it for what it is worth.

THE AUTHOR.



Picked just a trifle too soon.

P R E L U D E .

“When Greek meets with Greek,” is a phrase
often heard

From persons who seek to express in a word
The fury or vim of some strife which occurred.

And yet, it has come to me frequent of late,
When I think of our own “Civil War,”

That it hardly is needful now to relate,
Or allude to commotions of such early date,
And use them as symbols of anger and hate,
Since we have others stronger by far.

Long before South Car’lina insulted our flag,
And rallied her sons ’neath that secession “rag,”
A hatred existed, which never had lag’d.

’Twas brother ’gainst brother, and clan against
clan ;

The result of a long-standing feud,
That had rankled and burned in the heart of each
man,
North and South, East and West, since the nation
began —

Till at last it burst forth, by some cruel breeze
fan’d,

In a flame that could not be withstood.

For three years and over the war had raged on
With a fury scarce equal'd under the sun ;
Yet peace seemed nò nearer than when it begun.
Grant fighting near Richmond, while Sherman and
Hood

Were off on their trip to the sea ;
And Banks up Red river, the prospect seemed
good
For several years more, of a land drenched in
blood —
And “Copper-Heads” North, doing all that
they could
To keep us from winning the day.

Then Early came Northward and threatened to
take
The City of Washington, which seemed at stake,
On movements that Grant might be able to make,
Three corps were dispatched with all haste, round
the coast,
And Sheridan placed in command ;
In forwarding troops not a moment was lost,
While they man'd all the works, and strength-
ened the “Post”
With “Hundred-day Soldiers,” who came in a
host
From each Northern part of the land.

When Early discovered our heavy works there,
With guns in position and troops everywhere,
He left for "The Valley," and we for his rear.
We crossed Harper's Ferry without much delay,
And moved toward "Tom's Brook" with a will;
We closed in upon them the very next day
And took "Snicker's Gap," at the foot of
"Luray,"
Then "Charlestown," and "Winchester," "Kern-
town," and "Bley,"
And next fought and took "Fisher's Hill."

A few days thereafter I had to report
With troop at Headquarters, to act as escort
To Sheridan, who was about to depart;
Being called away from his place on the line,
On some mission to Washington bent:
So, for a few days his command he resigned,
And placed General Wright at its head for the
time,
But judging from actions, would leave one in-
clined
To believe that few knew where he went.

The most of our army was lying in line
At or near Cedar Creek, the scene of my rhyme ;
Where camp-rumor said, it would stay for some
time.

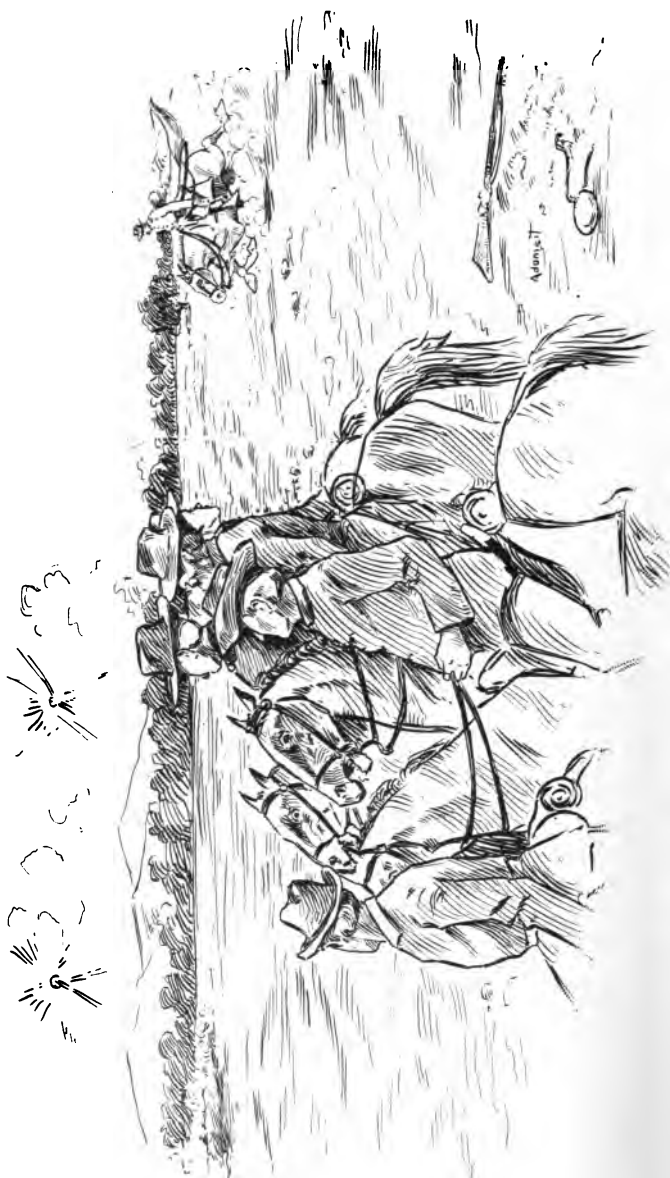
For three days and nights it had lain there the
same

As it was the morning he left ;
What news of importance the enemy gained !
What work of destruction it there may have
planned !

Or hope of success for the scheme entertained,
Perhaps you already have guessed.



**“Oh! flag, that would make us bankrupt,
But that thy folds are priceless.”**



But way down the pike, leading off to our rear
A swift riding horseman is seen to appear

CEDAR CREEK.

Confronting each other like tigers at bay,
Two war-battered armies in grim silence lay,
'Croست the Shenandoah Valley that October day.
These veterans were all that that word can
 imply ;

And as brave as the bravest of men.
When duty demanded, they feared not to die,
But faced the dread monster with colors flung
 high,
And a firm martial tread and undaunted eye
 They had done it again and again.

The flower of this nation met there that day,
In that army in blue and army in gray,
And took their position in battle array.
Of every advantage each sought to make most,
 And wheel'd into their places full soon ;
But as evening closed in, 'round each battle-scar'd
 host,
And drew down its shades, with the stealth of a
 ghost,
All semblance of enmity seemed to be lost,
 While they slept 'neath a pale waning moon.

There, prone on the ground, 'neath the stars of
the night,

Lay the sturdy and brave in dream-visions bright,
Nor reck'd what might come, ere the dawn's
early light.

"Twelve o'clock and all's well," the sentinels say,
And the answering call comes again ;

But look ! From their right, a long column in
gray,

'Round our union left-flank, is feeling its way
To a bend in the river that to our rear lay,
By a bridle-path rugged and dim.

With that feat accomplished, the stream is soon
crossed

By these daring rebels, who take up their post
At a point where they hope to harm us the
most.

Then charge on the lines of our slumbering
men,

Who hurriedly rise to their feet,
And an unequal contest wage with great vim,
'Gainst the on-coming foe, but darkness and din,
Confusion of orders, and ranks growing thin,
Compel their reluctant retreat.



But look! From their right, a long column in gray,
'Round our union left-flank, is feeling its way.

A battery hailing from some place "out West,"
Disrobed for the night, and were found thus undressed,

When Early invaded our lines on the left.

A fierce rebel yell the still morning air rent,

And told that the foemen had come :

With clothing abandoned, but purpose intent,

A scene from "Black Crook" to the drama was
lent

While these boys tried hard to explain what
they meant,

But spoke through the mouths of their guns.

Our left being broken, fall sullenly back,

With dead and dying bestrewing their track,

But give blow for blow to the ones that attack.

Shot and shell, grape and shrapnel are filling the
air,

Ere the earliest streak of the dawn ;

While the rattle of drums and the trumpet's wild
blare,

And resounding of arms can be heard every-
where ;

And the swift charging columns are seen here and
there ;

By the flash of each hot panting gun.

The fight became general along the whole way
From North Mountain pike to the vale of
Luray,
Before the sun rose o'er the hill-tops that day.
On the right and right-center the battle was
waged
With a valor no mortal can tell ;
In hand to hand struggles they fiercely engaged,
Surpassing the fury of lions uncaged,
And charged back and forth in their unbridled
rage,
While brave men like autumn leaves fell.

Our left, and left-center, are fast losing ground ;
Their guns have been taken, their lines are swept
down
Before that wild whirl-wind, whose zeal knows no
bound.
Some break for the rear in the wildest dismay,
While others seem losing their head,
As generals and staff in the broad light of day,
Leave others to care for themselves as they may,
And ride from the field, swiftly making their
way
To join with the rest that have fled.

The sight was appalling to those who remained
And struggled so bravely their lines to maintain
Against such great odds, on that gore slippery
plain.

The ground was all furrowed with shot and with
shell,

And garnished with wounded and dead ;
That lay in profusion, the story to tell,
Of hail which swept hill-side, and woodland, and
dell,

Till that gory field seemed one mighty page
fell

Ruled thick with the blue and the red.

The rebels elated at what they have done,
Brave all opposition and swiftly rush on,
Till they come to the Sixth Corps ; stalwart and
strong.

Then like huge ocean billows that sweep the low
shore,

But break on the reefs they submerge,
Receding in haste, to repeat o'er and o'er,
The mad, hopeless conflict the same as before,
They mass whole divisions, which steady and sure,
Come charging in surge upon surge.



The ground was all furrowed with shot and with shell,
And garnished with wounded and dead.

But they might as well think of forcing their way
Up Gibraltar's rock front, with her guns at full
play,

As hope to break through the "old sixth corps"
that day.

Our left being broken, this corps had to form

With one wing swung back like a gate
From where it was located, early that morn,
To a low wooded ridge near a large field of corn,
Where grimly it waited the on-coming storm,
And met it as stubborn as fate.

The smoke becomes stifling, the battle more
loud,

Like the roar of Niagara, stately and proud,
Or the foot-fall of God on the ledge of a cloud.
Our left fight like demons, but somehow they
learn

That Sheridan is not on the field.
Their ranks are all broken, their lines have been
turned,

Their bravest resistance the proud foemen
spurned ;

And on through their scattered bands fiercely it
burned,

Compelling great numbers to yield.



The smoke becomes stifling, the battle more loud.

But way down the pike, leading off to our rear,
A swift riding horseman is seen to appear,
While waves of commotion are filling the air.
His steed seemed to know what the union troops
lacked,

And what he was commissioned to do.
For with nostrils distended and ears lying back,
His neck well stretched out and his rein hanging
slack,
With rider poised low on that sinewy back,
Like a strong well shot arrow he flew.

He charged to the front, then his rider drew
rein,
'Midst storms of applause, which again and again
Rent the air, as they shouted Sheridan's name.
He paused just a bit, ere he dashed down the
line,

To tighten his hot charger's girth ;
And with an assurance that's simply sublime,
He turned to those standing near by on the
line,
And swore that he'd show them in four hours
time
The worst beaten army on earth.



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He charged to the front, then his rider drew rein
'Midst storms of applause, which again and again
Rent the air as they shouted Sheridan's name.

The thrill was magnetic ; as soon as they learned
That Phil had got back, all the stragglers returned ;
The lines straightened out, and our left was re-
formed.

Like a withering cyclone they then charge the
foe,

And each column its formation kept ;
They carry the earth-works wherever they go,
The gains of the rebels they quickly undo,
Who are forced to fall back, and they reel to and
fro

By a huge broom of bayonets swept.

They rally and charge with a blood-curdling yell
That rolls and re-echos, and adds to the swell
Of the roar of the cannon and shrieking of shell.
Men are stricken and fall in great groups on each
side,

And are left to the death Angel's care ;
While the red waves of war, like some storm-rid-
den tide,
Or stream from volcano, down steep mountain-
side,

Bent on havoc and caring for naught else beside,
Burns its way, right and left, near and far.



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The thrill was magnetic ; as soon as they learned
That Phil had got back, all the stragglers returned.



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The lines straightened out and our left was reformed.



Like a withering cyclone they then charge the foe
And each column its formation kept.

The fight which was furious has now grown sublime ;

The mad screaming shell to the bugles keep time

As they charge and re-charge along the whole line.

George Custer's bold horsemen sweep round on the right

And land square on the enemy's flank
That lay near the river, then plainly in sight,
And using their sabres with all of their might,
We soon had the whole rebel army in flight
'Crost the stream to the opposite bank.

Nine full rebel batteries stopped over there
And took up position with painstaking care,
As if urged by motives akin to despair.
Our riders quailed not at this desperate prank,
They knew that their moment had come ;
So quicker than magic they close up each rank,
And driving the spur in their weary steed's flank,
They charge through the stream, up the opposite bank,
And sabre the men at their guns.



That feat was accomplished at terrible cost,
When counting the number of lives that were
lost

Ere the river was reached, and the water was
crossed.

God comfort the mothers, God pity the sons

That were out in that murderous rain ;
For ere we could form, fifty-four rebel guns
Sent grape-shot and canister, shrapnel and
bombs,

In volley on volley which through our ranks
plunged,

Till the way was strewn thick with our slain.

The charge was most brilliant, and well it de-
serves

An honorable mention in historic verse ;

'Twas never surpassed by another on earth.

The sweep of their fire can scarcely be known --

'Twas like swarms of bees rudely unhived.

And were I to speak from impressions alone,

I'd say that a million of missiles were thrown

At each trooper crossing that hot torrid
zone ;

And I marvel that any survived.

The scene that ensued beggars language to tell ;
Twas a wild frightful orgie, depicted quite well
In Dante's Inferno by "The Break-up in
Hell."

Like a storm-swollen river, when bursting its
banks,

Leaves wreckage strewn thick in its path ;
So most of their army, now broken in ranks,
With rear unprotected and unguarded flanks,
Were flying pell-mell from the on-coming
"Yanks,"

As if swept by some besom of wrath.

The things which they took from us early that
day

Together with theirs were strewn thick in the
way,

Like wind-driven leaves on an October day.

Their arms and equipage were seen everywhere,

And their wagon trains blocking the way,

Deserted by teamsters and left to the care

Or hindrance of whoever next might be there,

While they, with their arms and legs sawing the
air,

Like the rest, swiftly hurried away.

With their army stampeded and no seeming
head,
A few fiercely fighting, but most of them fled,
'Twas not hard to recall what Sheridan said.
We followed them fast, over field and through
glade,
Till after the set of the sun ;
Then just as the day was beginning to fade,
And all nature take on that strange evening
shade,
On their staggering column our last charge was
made,
And the memorable battle was won.

Hurrah for Phil Sheridan, gallant and brave,
Who could turn back defeat in that great tidal
wave !
Cheers and tears for each hero who found there a
grave !
Mounds may subside o'er their mouldering clay.
And rust may destroy sword and gun ;
But here in conclusion permit me to say,
That whoever took part in that battle that day,
Whether wearing the blue or wearing the gray,
Will never forget Cedar Run.



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Then just as the day was beginning to fade,
And all nature take on that strange evening shade,
On their staggering column our last charge was made,
And the memorable battle was won.

The boys who contended so grandly that day,
In response to a summons which all must obey,
Are descending life's river and passing away.
But they close up their ranks and together keep
step,

While they look the dread foe in the eye ;
Knowing well that a harvest is sure to be reaped,
From the seed which they've sown, and the books
which are kept
Will reveal their true worth : but the world, we
regret,
Grows poorer when such brave men die.



The boys who contended so grandly that day,
Are descending life's river and passing away.



A comrade stoops by side of one
Who's day fast nears its setting sun.

AFTER THE BATTLE.

Here sank two foemen, face to face,
With the dread bayonet still in place
Where plunged by each when first they met
With purpose grim and features set,
Unyielding at their latest breath,
The ruling passion strong in death.

A wounded soldier crawls away
To sheltered spot and there he lay
With frozen smile upon his face,
While clutching tight in death's embrace,
A type of girlish beauty rare ;
And lock, it's said, of mother's hair.

Two shattered forms 'neath broken gun,
With faces upturned to the sun ;
One dressed in blue, one dressed in gray,
Yet duplicate in every way ;
So much so, that no one on earth
Would doubt that they were twin'd at birth.



Two shattered forms 'neath broken gun.

Stern cruel fate, didst thou demand
A brother's blood at brother's hand !
Or broughtst thou kinsmen face to face,
At such a time and such a place,
And on that blood-besprinkled plain
At the same spot let each be slain ?

A rebel colonel aged and gray,
Beside a Union soldier lay,
While from each ugly gaping wound
Their life-blood mingled on the ground ;
Stern foes, while tossed on war's rough tide,
Yet dropped their anchor side by side.

As we go all pale with the boatman, o'er
On our final voyage across the tide,
'Midst the terrible din of the breakers' roar,
As the wild waves dash on that unknown
 shore,
Sometimes you know that friend and foe
Will crouch and cuddle down side by side.

But why seek further to portray
The sights that met our eyes that day :
To give them all might not be best
At such a time, hence we desist :
We've kept you now too long, I fear,
So let us draw the curtain here.

GOODNIGHT!

Goodnight, comrades, day is waning,
Evening shades will soon have come ;
Fast our shadows' length are gaining,
As recedes the sinking sun,
And life's march will soon be done.
Hark ! There goes the sunset gun ;
But on fame's eternal pages
Graved in living lines of light,
There to stand through all the ages,
Read by peasants, kings and sages,
You have said, "'Twas not for wages,
Nor for conquest, but for right,
That we joined that bitter fight."
Goodnight, "Old Boys," goodnight !



THE END.

Congratulatory Order from General Custer.

TO THOSE BOYS WHO CHARGE ON THE RIGHT.

APPOMATTOX COURT HOUSE,
April 9th, 1865.

Soldiers of the Third Cavalry Division :

With profound gratitude toward the God of battles, by whose blessings our enemies have been humbled and our arms rendered triumphant, your commanding General avails himself of this, his first opportunity, to express to you his admiration of the heroic manner in which you have passed through the series of battles which to-day resulted in the surrender of the enemy's entire army.

The record established by your indomitable courage is unparalleled in the annals of war. Your prowess has won for you even the respect and admiration of your enemies. During the past six months, although in most instances confronted by superior numbers, you have captured from the enemy in open battle, one hundred and eleven pieces of field artillery, sixty-five battle flags, and upwards of ten thousand prisoners of war, includ-

ing seven General officers. You have never lost a gun—never lost a color—and have never been defeated. And notwithstanding the numerous engagements, in which you have borne a prominent part, including those memorable battles of the Shenanhoah, you have captured every piece of artillery the enemy has dared to open upon you. The near approach of peace renders it improbable that you again will be called upon to undergo the fatigues of the toilsome march or the exposure of the battle-field; but should the assistance of keen blades, wielded by your sturdy arms, be required to hasten the coming of that glorious peace for which we have so long been contending, the General commanding is proudly confident that in the future, as in the past, every demand will meet with a hearty and willing response. Let us hope that our work is done, and that, blessed with the comfort of peace, we may soon be permitted to enjoy the pleasures of home and friends.

For our comrades who have fallen, let us ever cherish a grateful remembrance. To the wounded and those who languish in Southern prisons, let our heartfelt sympathies be tendered.

And now speaking for myself alone, when the

war is ended and the task of the historian begins ; when those deeds of daring which have rendered the name of the Third Cavalry Division imperishable, are inscribed upon the bright pages of our country's history, I only ask that my name may be written as that of the commander of the Third Cavalry Division.

G. A. CUSTER,
Brevet Major General.

A. ADJ. GEN. BARNHARDT.



When foemen flaunting a foreign rag, threatened
this land to quell,
An Eagle perched upon our flag and screamed
like a scream from Hell ;
And our sturdy sires with a purpose grim thronged
to the battle-field
And swore by The Everliving God, that they
would never yield
Tho they waded thro gore till the crack of doom,
till not a man was left
To redden his sword in the foeman's blood ; it
was " Liberty or death."

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MAY 6 - 1963

